

# Exploring Theme in the Novel

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

As in the short story, **theme** communicates what the novel is about—the problems and issues that are most important to the author.

## THEMES IN THE NOVEL

Just as in the short story, you must remember that a theme is not a summary of the plot. A novel's themes are the universal ideas suggested by the specifics of the novel that can be stated in *general* terms.

**Theme's expanded functions in the novel** As with other elements of fiction, theme takes on special functions in the expanded space of the novel. The greater length of the novel allows the novelist to explore themes more richly and also to develop parallels and contrasts throughout the work. (This can be seen in the way that Aldous Huxley explores the theme of the dangers of technology in his futuristic novel *Brave New World*.)

**Some standard themes found in novels** Although every novel's themes are linked to its individual characters, settings, and plot, novelists have drawn on many traditional themes that have been explored throughout the history of literature.

Have you encountered any of these traditional themes in your study of the novel?

- Growth from tragedy to self-knowledge (as explored in *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles)
- The conflict between man and fate (as explored in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*)
- Discovering the dark side of human nature (as explored in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*)
- Tragic love (as explored in Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*)
- The dangers of totalitarian government (as explored in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*)

## RECOGNIZING THEMES IN A NOVEL

A novel communicates its important themes in a variety of ways. In looking for themes, consider some of these possible clues:

**The "world view" implied by the novel** Is the author's tone optimistic or pessimistic? Does the novel end happily or tragically? Does the novel communicate a central message?

**The title** Does the novel's title suggest any important themes?

**Imagery or symbols** Does the author introduce repeating images or symbols that seem to have special significance?

**Important-sounding statements** Do the author, narrator, or characters in the novel make general observations that express possible themes for the book as a whole?

## QUESTIONS TO ASK WHILE YOU ARE READING A NOVEL:

1. How do the novel's themes function in the novel? Do they remind you of themes you have encountered in other novels you have read?
2. What clues does the author use to communicate the novel's themes?